

Society of American Archivists: ARCHIVES 2008

# Personal Digital Archives

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## What is happening



### *Living with personal digital materials*

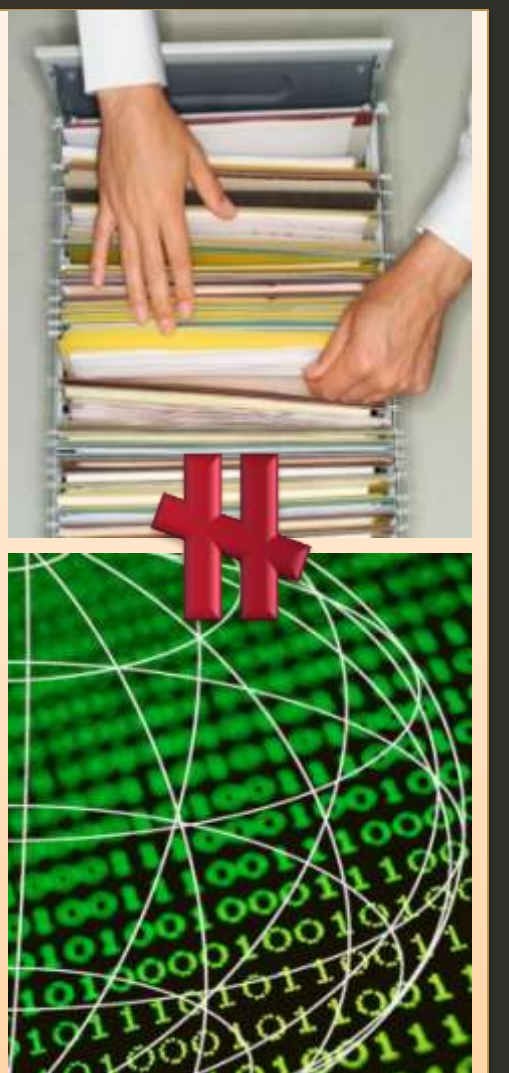
- ✚ **Everyday accumulation:** Individuals are constantly surrounded by evolving digital information technology. Consequently, they **accumulate a large amount of personal digital materials overtime** in their everyday lives (e.g., digital photographs, document files, websites, blogs, e-mails, audio-video materials, etc.).
- ✚ **Everyday management:** Individuals develop and practice **their own methods to manage** their personal digital materials using various on/off-line virtual spaces, whether it is “benign neglect,” panicky backup, building a labyrinth of directories, or creating multiple duplicate files and storing them in different locations.

### *Increasing archival preservation needs for personal digital materials*

Personal digital materials are and may be the only **evidence of the active interactions between individuals and society**; they are **the fragments of memory documenting the lives** of individuals, families, and society. Personal digital materials should be **treated as archives and preserved beyond one’s lifetime** so future generations of families, communities, and societies can (re)construct their identities, traditions, and histories.

## Challenges of long-term survival of personal digital materials

- ✚ **Less likelihood to survive:** There is great risk for personal digital materials to become obsolescent due to rapid technological changes.
- ✚ **Immeasurable quantity:** Due to the ubiquitous use of digital technology in everyday life, the amount of personal digital materials is staggering.
- ✚ **Inherently personal:** The value of personal digital materials shifts over time through individuals’ lives. Selecting what to keep, what to destroy, and who will have access to them is a matter of personal decision.
- ✚ **Heterogeneity:** It is difficult to generalize the types of personal digital materials and the everyday record creating/keeping practices of individuals.



## What is needed



### *Grass-root level preservation of personal digital materials:*

#### **Personal and/or Family Digital Archives**

- ✚ Functions as a **space for self-representation and/or self-reflection**; a place where future generations can learn about the individual, what she did and how she thought of herself.
- ✚ Functions as a centralized **private personal/family digital repository**.
- ✚ Aims for **long-term preservation as an archives**, rather than as mere data storage.
- ✚ Managed and operated by individuals as a **part of their everyday record-keeping practices**.
- ✚ Will be **maintained through future generations** by families or by archival institutions.

## Personal Digital Archives and the Archival Profession

The preservation of cultural memories captured in personal documents (paper and recently, digital form) is one of the primary duties of the archival profession for hundreds of years. Preservation practices, theories, and experiences nurtured in the archival profession will provide the intellectual foundation for personal digital archives.

- ✚ **In the post-custodial era**, the **archivist** should take on the **role as facilitator** of personal digital archives or **as the developer** of personal digital archives system.
- ✚ While individual personal digital archives function as **private archives**, they can be **integrated into the larger effort** to preserve society’s cultural heritage under the concept of **documentation strategies**.
- ✚ **Issues of appraisal, privacy, intellectual property rights, and access**, which are all largely discussed in the archival tradition, will provide valuable **insights** into similar issues of personal digital archives.
- ✚ **Digital preservation strategies and methods** that have been seriously explored in the field of archives for decades, such as the development of the Open Archives Information System Reference Model and practices of institutional repositories, can be applied to **develop system models, software, and/or services for personal digital archives**.

**Current movements:** Numerous entities are conducting research on how individuals are managing (keeping, organizing, and retrieving) their personal digital materials. [e.g., Digital Lives Research Project, Researchers in Personal Information Management (PIM) studies, Microsoft MyLifeBits, etc.]